

Levi S. Gibbs, *Song King: Connecting People, Places, and Past in Contemporary China*

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Wang Xiangrong is the name of a master Chinese folk-song performer, or “song king” (*gewang*), from Northern Shaanxi Province. Based on the example of this individual, the author brilliantly analyzes the role of the song kings and their female counterparts, song queens (*gehou*), in Chinese society. The introduction sets out the framework and aims in considerable detail. The individual chapters then take up specific aspects of the study, introducing and analyzing illustrative songs.

The thrust of the book is social, not musical. In other words, it is about how the song kings and queens communicate to the people attitudes towards life, love, relationships, politics, place (especially home), and history. There is some analysis of the texts of individual songs but very little of their music. The author states that “Over the course of this book, I argue that song kings and queens serve as intermediaries providing a sense of continuity amidst change” (7).

The book is infused with the life of the song king Wang Xiangrong, as well as his ideas on song, society, politics, history, and art. Although other song kings and queens do get some mention, the focus is so strongly on Wang that the book verges on being an artistic biography dedicated to him. Born in 1952, just three years after the Chinese Communist Party established the People's Republic of China, Wang spent his childhood in a small mountain village near China's iconic Yellow River and became immersed in the culture of the region. He later moved to larger cities and established a reputation as a well-known representative performer of the Chinese folksong, especially of Northern Shaanxi. His move “from urban anonymity to urban fame” (19) accompanied China's crucially important trend toward urbanization during his lifetime.

The book's author, Levi S. Gibbs, is a young scholar of Chinese performing arts, who reads, writes, and speaks Chinese. The bibliography contains many books both in English and Chinese, including several of his own publications, one of them in Chinese.

Nothing shows how a song king goes beyond art into civilization, place, and history more than Wang's songs expressing deep feelings about the Yellow River. Since time immemorial, the river's yellowish loess soil has fertilized the Great North China Plain. While its frequent floods brought misery to millions, it nourished the Chinese and their civilization to such an extent that it became one of the people's most important icons.

Wang's home village is near the Yellow River and frequently appears in his songs. Referring to one of these songs, Wang said: "I see the 'Song of the Yellow River Boatmen' as the history of China—the history of the Yellow River, China's history, and the human affairs that took place on the Yellow River, the relationship between nature and mankind" (196). Wang is not only a song king, but his songs praise the icons of Chinese culture; they interconnect China's past, present, and future.

Another example illustrating social attitudes is how people in different places see sexual morality. Wang's home was decidedly rural in a country where high culture and Confucian morality were associated with urban cultural elites. Erotic songs were part of the normal repertoire of the rural culture, and many revolutionaries admired them as simple and pure. "Such 'brazen' expression of erotic content in rural songs has either been seen as reflecting a lack of education and civilized behavior or a form of purity, untouched by the constraints of Confucian and other moral frameworks" (167). Wang was always careful to take his audience into account when he sang such songs, remembering that the same song might be received favorably by one audience, such as a rural one, but not by another, such as in an urban theater. Gibbs gives a detailed analysis of one of Wang's mildly erotic songs, noting the care Wang took in choosing the right audience for the performance of such items.

The book has good scholarly appurtenances. The bibliography includes a long list of primary Chinese-language sources in addition to those in English. The documentation is thus excellent, and Gibbs uses his sources well. It has interesting black-and-white pictures of Wang and other artists, as well as of Northern Shaanxi. Although technically not especially impressive, these pictures are evocative and add meaning to the book's content. Some of them show the poverty of the region, giving added emphasis to the importance of place as a determinant in the cultural life of China and its folk art. The book's notes, bibliography, and index are exemplary.

It would have been useful to explain the methodology in a bit more detail, but it is obvious from the content that it revolves around Gibbs's many interviews and long-term and deep friendship with Wang. Gibbs makes no secret of his admiration and affection for Wang. Does that slant his judgment? Perhaps! But I found the whole analysis penetrating and effective and the portrait of the artist sensible and well thought through.

I recommend this book strongly. It is very well-documented, reliable, analytical, and thoughtful but also full of empathy and feeling. It shows a deep concern for its subject, Wang Xiangrong, but also broad-ranging and theoretical analysis of Chinese society and history. Although highly specialized, it is also written in an accessible style and will interest all those fascinated by China and by the intersection between art and social life.

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